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Experiencing Education

by Christina Scott

(English 1101)

In school, students read about experiences that other people had: slaves getting freed by President Lincoln; and immigrants coming over to the new world packed in small quarters. The majority of students have never had a life experience like the ones they read about in history books, but it's assumed that they have had some kind of experience throughout their life that is similar. By drawing upon past experiences, the student is able to better understand the experiences that they read about. Education isn't just reading and writing; education is learning through life experiences and carrying those experiences with us so we can teach others what we have learned. Both essays are about just that - experiences. Each author writes about an experience that they had when they were young. Sherman Alexie taught himself how to read at an early age while Rolando Jorif taught himself the definition of freedom.

Alexie's essay "The Joy of Reading and Writing: Superman and Me" begins with him telling the story of how he taught himself how to read. The financial situation of his up-bringing may have been less than most middle-class families, but the one thing that his family had abundance of was books. Alexie learned not only how to read but to love reading. He used his love of reading to propel himself through the school system, removing himself from the stereotypical "Indian children who were expected to be stupid" (73). Alexie was initially going to become a pediatrician but was surprised when he became a writer instead. Ironically, though, he became a doctor in a figurative sense because, by visiting Indian reservation schools and passing on his passion of reading and writing to the kids, he is "trying to save their lives" as he saved his own (74).

In "Thinking" by Jorif, he tells about three experiences that taught him what freedom was and how it led him to the true definition. Jorif learned the first lesson when he got reprimanded for eating snow off a windowsill in class. He had just immigrated to America and never really experienced snow before, so who can blame him? He felt no one understood why he did it and no one probably did. So he learned "about freedom that day: you had better be discreet in your expression of it" (172). His mother taught him his second lesson. Jorif spent his "childhood in terror of not being properly dressed in school, or any place else, for that matter" because the dress code was an important rule in school. When he did finally lose a button from his shirt he asked his mom to sew it for him and she showed him how to fix it himself. Jorif's "second lesson about freedom was that you had better be able to take care of your own needs" (172). His third lesson brought him to the true definition of freedom and realizing what it meant. Being an immigrant Jorif learned first hand, through some dark experiences, "about prejudice and truth, justice, and the American way" (172). Therefore, he experienced first hand the first paragraph of the Declaration of Independence which he had to memorize for class. When it came time for him to recite it he realized that he "was the only one who knew it. Not only that, but when I recited it, the audience of blank faces meant that I was the only one who understood it" (172). Jorif was able to understand what freedom was by having the experiences he had. If Jorif never went through some of the things he experienced in life as an immigrant, he would never have the insights into freedom that he has now or will in the future.

These two essays show us two different people having to adapt to the school culture which is different from the traditions of their heritage. I also had to learn to adapt. My family immigrated from Mexico and brought their strong Catholic background with them. After attending a Catholic school from Kindergarten to fourth grade, my parents decided to convert and I then got transferred to

a Christian Reformed school. The two schools were different, not just in the religious teaching aspect but also the culture of the classrooms. Critical thinking was never stressed at the Catholic school I had attended. When I needed to answer questions about a passage in a book I had just read, I was told to just flip back and search for the answer I was looking for. I was also shown, by other students, to look over the questions first and then skim the passage until I found the answers I was looking for and then I wouldn't need to read the assignment any further. Of course, when you're just searching for the answers you want you miss the bigger picture and miss the answers you need in order to fully understand what the author is trying to convey. I had to quickly adjust to the way I read and thought about things when I entered the new school. It was a challenge for me at first, but once I realized how to teach myself how to read again I surprised even myself at how much I achieved.

We can educate ourselves from our experiences and teach others too. These two authors showed us from their own life experiences that it is not always a hindrance coming from a different culture, but that it can broaden people's horizons.

Works Cited

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